

The design of the brick house at Chesterville Plantation draws on a rich architectural tradition. Though its style recalls older European structures of the Georgian style, we can also point to a number of American buildings for close parallels. Because Chesterville was lost in 1911 and is poorly documented, a look at its architectural heritage and at similar structures may help us understand better what it may have been like.

European architecture during the Renaissance had turned backwards to Greek and Roman building styles, most famously advocated by Italian architect Andrea Palladio in his *Four Books on Architecture* (1570). This text, in many ways a builder's manual, was to guide European and American architects for centuries to come and be the guiding light for the "Classical Revival" in architecture.

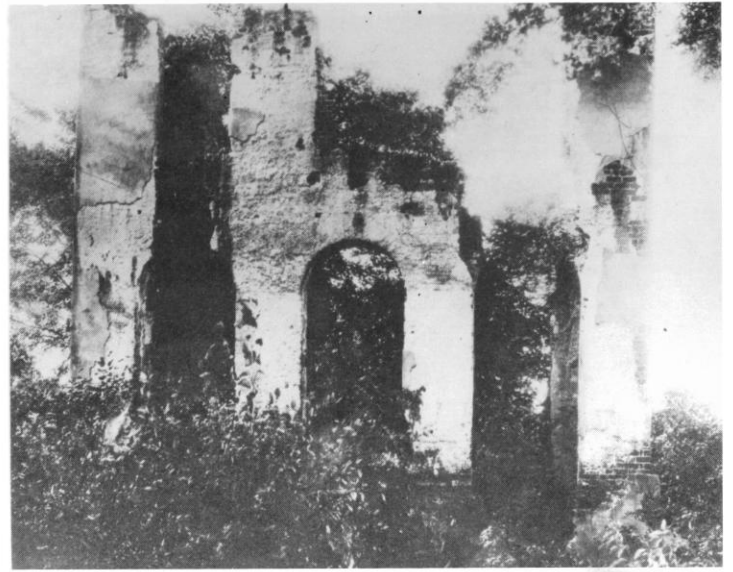
In England, we can see some influence of this new trend in earlier years, but it is not until the work of Inigo Jones in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century that Palladian architecture truly takes root. In both his work and in that of the next great English architect, Sir Christopher Wren, it was molded into a distinctively English form, drawing further inspiration from previous English styles. By the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the resultant "Georgian" style (named for the British monarchs who ruled during much of its popularity) was well established both in England and in her colonies. In the American colonies, this developed under the influence of Thomas Jefferson and others into the more American "Federal" style. All of these styles in the Palladian tradition value symmetry and regularity in design, tend to use numerous windows, and emphasize the importance of a building's proportions.

This is the heritage which we can see in the surviving documentation of Chesterville. The building is generally supposed to have been begun in 1771, when George Wythe placed an order for building supplies with London merchant J.H. Norton for building "a small house." Interestingly, though the legacy of the colonial Georgian style can certainly be seen, the house is in many ways more similar to later Federal structures. When Wythe advertised to sell the property in 1792, he described a "large, new convenient brick house, neatly finished, with four large rooms in it and offices below," suggesting that this may be closer to the actual construction date, which would put the structure comfortably within the Federal period.

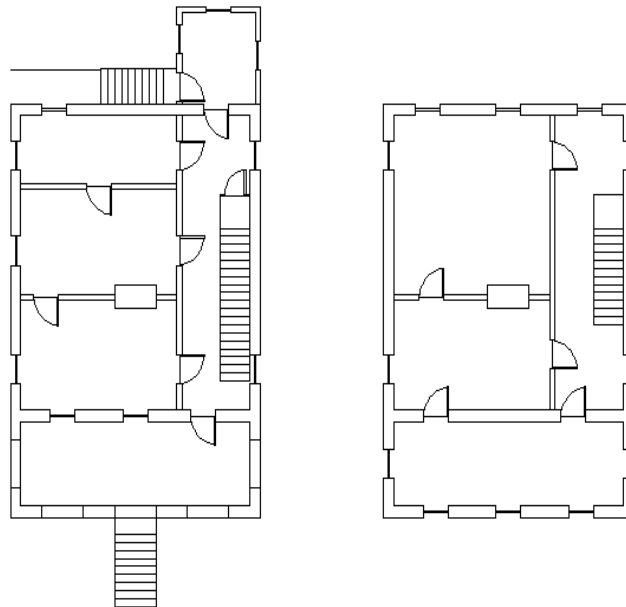
We have very limited documentation of Chesterville. This includes photographs of the front of the house in 1905 and after the 1911 fire, a handful of written descriptions, and a plan drawing of its first and second floors made in 1971, based on information provided by Mr. Fay Collier, then-octogenarian who had visited the house several times before the burning.



The only surviving photograph of Chesterville, 1905



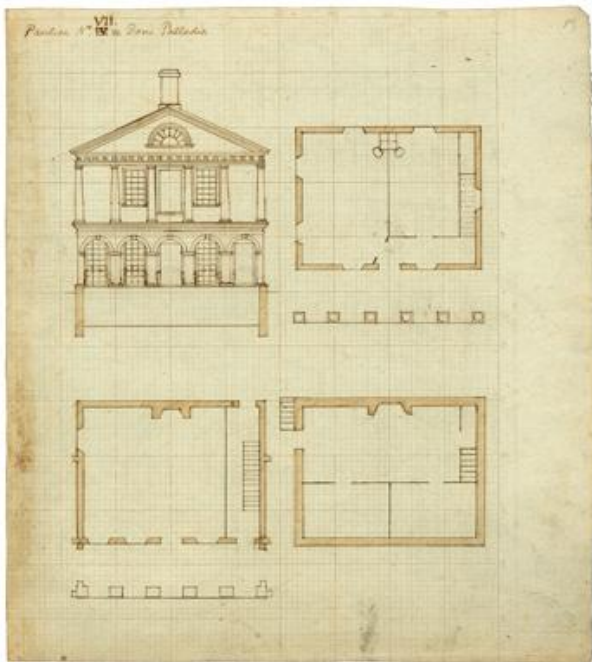
The Chesterville ruin in 1915



A modern reconstruction of the first and second floors, based on the 1971 drawing

As we see in these documents, a very unusual characteristic of the building was that its main entryway, rather than being centered, was in a side bay, more in the style of a townhouse of the period. Frank Farmer, who directed the archaeological work done on the earlier stone structure in the 1970s, believed that this was not original, but other near-contemporary structures with similar layouts have since been identified which suggest otherwise.

The first of these is Pavilion VII at the University of Virginia, begun 1817. This is a 5-bay rather than a 3-bay structure, but it otherwise very substantially resembles Chesterville. The façade sports an arcaded porch, and the first floor plan includes an entrance to one side opening on a side hall and staircase, just as at Chesterville. Pavilion VII does have an additional entrance in the central bay, and it is possible that Chesterville once had this feature as well. It is interesting to note that this, the first of the UVA pavilions to be built, is the only one to have this type of plan, with all later ones instead having their staircases in more out-of-the-way locations, as was more typical of Jefferson's style.



An 1814 study for Pavilion VII by Jefferson  
 Courtesy, Special Collections, University of Virginia Library



Pavilion VII, image courtesy Mary Ann Sullivan, Bluffton University

The second parallel structure is Berry Hill in Orange County, Virginia, built in 1827. The form of this structure is quite similar to Chesterville, with a 3-bay arcaded façade and main entrance in a side bay, entering on a hallway with a staircase. This structure is attributed to William Philips, a master mason who was employed by Thomas Jefferson during the construction of the University of Virginia. It is noteworthy to observe that this house originally had a columned portico above its first-floor arcade similar to that seen on Pavilion VII, but that it was bricked up shortly after it was built. The arrangement of the second floor of Chesterville as described by Mr. Collier suggests that this may have been the original form there as well. Above the front porch is a relatively shallow room the entire length of the south wall, just the right size and location to have once been such an open portico. This possibility is given further weight by the fact that the windows and gable seen in the 1905 photograph are most likely not original.



Berry Hill in 1980



Floor plan courtesy Robert Nigmond, Realtor in Orange, VA

The façade of the house is also similar to the Randolph-Semple House in Williamsburg, also attributed to Jefferson, and to Plate XXXVII from Morris' *Select Architecture* (1757), on which this house was supposedly based.

Chesterville has traditionally been attributed to Thomas Jefferson. His connection to the similar structures described above makes this possibility yet more intriguing, but no extant documentation ties him to the building in any way. However, he was a long-time friend of George Wythe and had an avid interest in architecture, and it is very likely a subject they would have discussed. Also of interest is the fact that George Wythe's father in law, Richard Taliaferro, was an architect. Very few structures are attributed to him, but he is sometimes credited with introducing Jefferson to certain architectural classics and may have been an important influence in Jefferson's early style. Thus, it is possible that Chesterville, rather than being designed by Jefferson, was simply designed in a style which Jefferson later used. Unless new documents come to light, any such possibilities remain purely conjectural.

Based on the connections we have drawn, we can suggest several things about Chesterville's original form. First, as noted above, it is possible that the second floor originally had a columned portico which was later bricked up. Second, the stucco which is seen in the 1905 photograph is most likely not original, although it is possible that it is. Third, it is probable that the building was not intended to stand alone, but was meant to have wings, an arcade connecting it to a dependency, or some other flanking structures, as was the case at Pavilion VII and Berry Hill and as would have been more typical of a structure in the Palladian tradition. Finally, it is likely that Chesterville would have originally had more elaborate architectural details, such as a projecting belt course at the division between the first and second storey, keystones and/or other detailing of the arches on the façade, and others.

For further reading:

Coffin, Lewis A and Arthur Cort Holden. *Brick Architecture of the Colonial Period in Maryland & Virginia*, New York: Dover Publications, 1970.

Jefferson, Thomas and Fiske Kimball. *Thomas Jefferson, Architect; original designs in the Coolidge Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, New York: Da Capo Press, 1968.

Reiff, Daniel D. *Small Georgian Houses in England and Virginia: origins and development through the 1750s*, Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1986.